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The Union of Intercultural Cooperation in Kvemo Kartli Province (Gardabani)
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**Conflict Potential Related to the Problems of Language
and Education in Georgia's Kvemo Kartli Province**

Policy paper

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Preface

The main objective of this paper is to analyse problems caused by the inability of the ethnic Azeri population of Georgia, the dominant ethnic group of Kvemo Kartli province, to speak Georgian, which is the only official language in the country (excluding the territory of Abkhazia) under the 1995 constitution of Georgia. This factor has long hindered the Azeri community's integration into Georgian society. It prevents the full participation of ethnic Azeri citizens in the country's social and political life and denies them equal opportunities for professional and career development. Language problems fuel estrangement between the Azeri and Georgian communities and even lay the groundwork for ethnic tensions, since some Georgians view Azeris' inability to speak Georgian as a sign of disrespect or disloyalty to the Georgian state. For their part, Azeri residents view demands to learn Georgian as unfair, especially if they are expressed categorically, and a reason for ethnic discrimination.

The system of public education, especially at the level of secondary schools, can prove an important tool to overcome the problem. So far, however, the system of non-Georgian-language schools, which provides secondary education for the overwhelming majority of ethnic minorities, has been part of the problem, not the solution. Today graduates of non-Georgian-language schools are not fluent in Georgian enough to fully participate in the country's social and political life or achieve professional development and job promotion. Despite recent reforms carried out by the Ministry of Science and Education, the situation in this sphere has not yet improved. In fact, some elements of the reforms have drawn strong protest from ethnic minorities because, in their opinion, such measures can undermine their chances of getting a full-fledged higher education in Georgia.

The paper is based on the results of study implemented in two districts of Kvemo Kartli Province in 2003 by the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) in cooperation with "Bridge" - a Union of Inter-Cultural Cooperation in Kvemo Kartli Region and the Union of Azeri Women of Georgia. The methodology of the research was developed jointly with experts of GTZ (German Organization for Technical Cooperation). The latter also took part in analysing the results of the study. The research included meetings with local residents, in-depth interviews with experts, focus-group discussions, and a qualitative sociological survey. In 2005 representatives of GTZ, together with members of CIPDD, carried out new discussions and interviews with experts in order to assess changes that took place after the Rose Revolution in November 2003, which brought

to power a new, reformist government. The CIPDD then revised the paper on the basis of the newly obtained data.

Overall situation

The Azeri community is Georgia's largest ethnic minority group. According to the 2002 census, 284,761 ethnic Azeris lived in Georgia (6.5 per cent of the country's total population). Most of them – 224,606 – resided in Kvemo Kartli Province, mainly in Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Gardabani, and Marneuli Districts. The region includes also the Tetri Tsqaro and Tsalka districts, and the town of Rustavi, but the proportion of the Azeri population is smaller there than in the above-mentioned four districts.

Table 1

	Total	Georgians	Azeri	Armenians	Others
Kvemo Kartli	497,530	222,450 - 44.7 per cent	224,606 - 45,1 per cent	31,777- 6.4 per cent	18,526 - 3.7 per cent
Gardabani district	114,348	60,832 - 53.2 per cent	49,993 - 43,7 per cent	1,060 - 0.9 per cent	2,463 - 2.2 per cent
Marneuli district	118,221	9,503 - 8.0 per cent	98,245 - 83,1 per cent	9,329 - 7.9 per cent	1,144 - 1.0 per cent
Bolnisi district	74,301	19,926 - 26.8 per cent	49,026 - 66,0 per cent	4,316 - 5.8 per cent	1,033 - 0.01 per cent
Dmanisi district	28,034	8,759 - 31.2 per cent	18,716 - 66,8 per cent	147	412 - 0.01 per cent

Table 1, which reflects the 2002 census data, shows that Gardabani and Marneuli Districts are home to the largest number of ethnic Azeri residents. While the Azeri population has the absolute dominance in Marneuli District, the situation in Gardabani is a bit different, as ethnic Georgians outnumber Azeris. However, the research was carried out in the eastern part of the district, closer to the Azerbaijani-Georgian border, where ethnic Azeri citizens are in the majority.

Residents of both districts are concentrated mainly in rural agricultural communities. Apart from the town of Marneuli, which accounts for 22.7 per cent of Marneuli District's population, there are 72 villages in the district, eight of them predominately Georgian, 55 Azeri, seven Armenian and two Greek. As for Gardabani District, 14.1 per cent of its

population dwell in the town of Gardabani, while the rest reside in 28 Georgian and 15 Azeri villages.

The Georgian community of Marneuli District is largely concentrated in urban rather than rural areas. The town of Gardabani has a mixed population: some 30 per cent of its inhabitants are ethnic Georgians, while the rest are mainly ethnic Azeri. These demographics were reflected in the sample questioned in the qualitative sociological survey: there were almost equal numbers of urban and rural residents among Georgian respondents (49.6 per cent and 50.4 per cent respectively), while the proportion of urban residents was much smaller among their Azeri counterparts (28.6 per cent and 71.4 per cent).

It is also important to look at the demographic dynamic: the region's population declined significantly in the 1990s due to the migration of local residents, mainly able-bodied men and women. Migration, caused largely by harsh economic conditions, affected all regions of the country and Kvemo Kartli is no exception in this regard. According to the 2002 census, the Kvemo Kartli population decreased 18.2 per cent in comparison with the previous census in 1989 (from 608,500 in 1989 to 497,530 in 2002). While 2,465 births were registered in Gardabani District in 1989, there were only 935 births in 2001. In the same period the number of registered marriages dropped from 846 (1989) to 242 (2002). The mortality rate also decreased, albeit not so drastically: from 766 (1989) to 677 (2002). At the same time, the population of the town of Gardabani reached 19,000 (2002), up from 17,700 (1989). The situation in Marneuli District is similar: over the same period the population of the town of Marneuli slipped from 28,400 (1989) to 26,900 (2002); the birth rate declined from 3,387 (1989) to 1,189 (2001); and the number of registered marriages plummeted from 990 to 135. However, these last parameters should be treated with caution, as they reflect both a real decrease of the births and marriages, and a reduction in the official registration thereof. Experts argue that in the post-Soviet era many residents (especially in rural communities) prefer to abstain from official registration of marriages, births and deaths. Furthermore, some experts question the quality of both the 1989 and 2002 censuses.

These demographic changes are corroborated by education-related statistics. There are four elementary, 12 basic, and 37 secondary schools in Gardabani District. The current total number of children attending these schools totals has dropped 26.6 per cent since 1990. Six elementary, 28 basic, and 53 secondary schools operate in Marneuli District. The overall number of schoolchildren in the district fell 29.6 per cent since 1990. Gardabani District has one Russian, 26 Georgian, and 10 Azeri schools. While in Marneuli District there are nine Georgian, 34 Azeri, five Armenian and seven Russian schools.

Analysts say that negative migration tendencies have continued into the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, the researchers were unable to obtain exact data on migration dynamics in recent years.

Analysis of language-related problems

Problems related to the fact that the majority of ethnic Azeri citizens of Georgia do not speak Georgian can be divided into several groups. The first group includes problems Azeris with a poor knowledge of Georgian encounter when dealing with state agencies or seeking jobs. The second group includes difficulties in obtaining adequate information about current developments in Georgia and obstacles to the participation of ethnic Azeris in the country's social and political life. This means that ethnic Azeris' inability to speak Georgian keeps them from becoming full-fledged citizens of Georgia and having a say in how the country develops. The third group of problems concerns the estrangement and distrust between the Azeri and Georgian communities of Georgia, which is largely due to the absence of a common language to communicate.

Table 2 illustrates the attitudes of different ethnic groups towards language-related problems. Namely, it shows that while the Azeri community is concerned mainly with the negative impact of the language problem on their employment opportunities and chances of getting benefits from the state, the Georgian population thinks that the potential of the language barrier to hamper relations between different ethnic groups is much more worrying.

Table 2

Answers to the question "What kind of problems can/does the inability to speak Georgian create for ethnic minorities of your district?" (select not more than three answers)

	Overall	Georgians	Azeri	Armenians
Skilled jobs are unavailable	38.2 per cent	35.6	39.3	39.7
Those who do not speak the language may lose their job	30.6 per cent	16.7	35.2	34.5
It is hard to interact with state agencies	25.0 per cent	11.9	32.7	20.7
The language problem creates a sense of inferiority	25.5 per cent	31.9	22.0	24.1
It is hard to get information about ongoing developments in the country	21.7 per cent	22.2	21.8	17.2
Rights of conscripts and servicemen in the Georgian army are violated	20.7 per cent	11.1	24.6	22.4
The language problem has a negative impact on personal relations	18.1 per cent	28.1	14.5	8.6
The language problem provokes family conflicts	17.3 per cent	19.3	16.4	19.0
The language problem makes it difficult to get an education	16.2 per cent	19.3	17.0	8.6

The state, citizens and jobs

The first group of problems is linked to the fact that due to the language problem ethnic Azeri citizens have difficulty communicating with public services and getting jobs in state-run organisations.

The difficulty interacting with state agencies. The fact that all paperwork and procedures in state agencies are in Georgian creates difficulties for ethnic Azeri residents not competent in the language. Citizens' complaints are sometimes rejected only because they are not written in Georgian. State agencies are bound to uphold the interests of citizens and provide interpreters when necessary. However, people often complain about the poor quality of the translation, which may even lead to the violation of their rights. Citizens can also communicate with officials in Russian, but this option is not always available since some officials do not speak that language. Many Azeri residents believe it would be fair to legalize the use of a language which the majority of local residents can understand (i.e. Russian) in state agencies in Azeri-populated areas for a certain transitional period (15-20 years), until the Azeri community achieves adequate fluency in Georgian.

The difficulty in getting and/or retaining a job. Ethnic Azeris are underrepresented in local governments of the regions with dominant Azeri populations, especially at the district and provincial (mkhare) levels. Azeri citizens are especially unhappy with the fact that law-enforcement structures are staffed "almost entirely with ethnic Georgians". Citizens usually identify the state with law-enforcement bodies, since they interact with the latter most often. The government has acknowledged that the inadequate representation of ethnic Azeris in governmental structures is a problem. When asked to explain why, government representatives blamed the fact that the majority of Azeri residents do not speak Georgian.

In addition, many skilled workers have lost their jobs or failed to find work due to their poor knowledge of Georgian. This is largely because ongoing reforms have required many specialists (physicians, lawyers, etc) to pass official qualification tests, which are administered only in Georgian. It is noteworthy that representatives of ethnic minorities are allowed to get assistance from interpreters during the tests, but not all of them have found this measure helpful. A respondent from a focus-group in Marneuli (2003) told the following story: "*My sister, a certified physician, twice tried to pass the qualification exams. She was accompanied by her [Georgian-language] teacher as an interpreter, but the teacher was unable to translate professional terminology and my sister failed the test as a result*".

Many Azeri citizens believe that their inability to speak Georgian is only a pretext, not the real reason. Some respondents even alleged that the government might in fact not be interested in teaching Georgian to ethnic minorities quickly and effectively. Critics accuse the government of carrying out what they call a “double-standard” staffing policy: although most ethnic Azeri employees of governmental agencies do not speak Georgian, they are not dismissed because it is easier for the authorities to govern the region with their help. On the other hand, young Azeris’ job applications are turned down even if they speak Georgian, because they are considered harder to control. As one Azeri respondent put it – “it does not suit them [Georgian authorities] because those with language proficiency and qualifications will hardly dance to just anybody’s tune”.

The lack of information and citizens’ inaction

Due to the language problem, ethnic Azeri citizens are largely unable to get comprehensive and adequate information about ongoing developments in the country. Accordingly, they have fewer opportunities to become active citizens, participate in the social and political life of Georgia and defend their own rights.

The language and information space. Television remains the most important source of information for the majority of Georgian citizens. There are currently a number of competing TV channels in Georgia. However, all of them broadcast mainly in Georgian, a language that most Azeri residents do not understand. Georgian Public Broadcasting is the only exception – it has a daily short (15-20-minute) news programme in Russian. However, respondents say that such a brief programme does not make any difference and, furthermore, it is one-sided, reflecting only the government’s point of view. Although Georgian radio has some programmes in Azeri, most Azeri residents are unaware of them. Azerbaijani, Russian and, to some degree, Turkish TV channels are the main sources of information for the local Azeri community.

In February 2006, with financial support from the OSCE, Georgian Public Broadcasting began translating evening news programmes into Azeri in real time, through local TV companies in Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Gardabani and Marneuli Districts. Given the experience of successful implementation of a similar project, also with the OSCE assistance, in Armenian enclaves of Samtskhe-Javakheti, the simultaneous translation of Georgian TV news programmes will hopefully help eliminate the lack of information in the Azeri-populated districts.

Residents of the districts under study who do not speak Georgian can also get information from the newspapers *Gurjistan* (in Azeri) and *Svobodnaya Gruzia* (in Russian). Both periodicals are funded by the state (it must be mentioned that after the Rose Revolution only newspapers published in minority languages have received state funding). In addition, there is the *Gardabani* newspaper, which has two sections – in Azeri and Georgian. The contents of its Azeri and Georgian pages differ from each other – the Azeri section is focused mainly on cultural and other information which may be of interest for the Azeri community.

Hence, a certain amount of information is available for non-Georgian-speaking residents in languages they can understand (Azeri and Russian). The scope of this information, however, is rather limited in comparison with that of the Georgian-language media. Furthermore, the Georgian population gets information mainly from independent media, which reflect differing opinions, including those critical of the government, while the Azeri- and Russian-speaking media are dependent on state-funded outlets. This last factor alone has caused controversy, as some people view such media as pro-government, one-sided, and unreliable. This difference takes on additional significance during elections. For instance, a member of a focus-group in Gardabani (2003) said the *Gurjistan* newspaper was compiled just as it used to be in Soviet times, on the basis of old Soviet standards, and its information was nowhere near interesting. Some other respondents, however, disagreed. They said that the newspaper's information was quite timely and important for the Azeri community, and that state funding for *Gurjistan* should continue.

The lack of knowledge of civil rights. Many respondents pointed out that the lack of knowledge of the national legislation was one of the major negative consequences of the language problem. Accordingly, this factor prevents citizens from protecting their rights effectively. The significance of this factor should not be exaggerated, however, as ethnic Georgians also know little about the country's laws. Nonetheless, ethnic Azeri residents usually attach great importance to it.

This is linked to the fact that the Azeri community remains distrustful of civil servants. According to the respondents, corrupt civil servants often deliberately deceive ethnic Azeri citizens, taking advantage of their poor knowledge of the official language and, consequently, the country's legislation. *“Some bureaucrats take advantage of farmers who do not know the laws well and do not speak the language at all. When it comes to taxation, for instance, they dictate their own terms and the farmers readily obey”* (a focus-group in Marneuli, 2003).

The Azeri community of Georgia is greatly concerned about its lack of awareness of post-revolution legislative processes in Georgia. For instance, Azeri participants of a meeting in Marneuli in late 2005 emphasised that they did not have sufficient information about such important resolutions of the Georgian parliament as the ratification of the European convention on the rights of national minorities (the participants did not know whether the convention was ratified with reservations) or the adoption of the law on local governance. In both cases Azeri residents were eager to find out whether these legislative documents would sanction the use of other languages apart from Georgian in local governments.

Citizens' inaction in social and political processes. Poor knowledge of Georgian and the resultant lack of information is an important reason behind the fact that Azeri citizens are less active in social and political processes than their Georgian counterparts, but it is not the only one. Most respondents highlighted the low level of the Azeri population's participation in civil processes, which is mainly limited to voting in elections. And as a rule, Azeri voters almost unanimously give their votes to the ruling party, mainly because they know little, if anything, about other political actors. It is also significant that ethnic minorities view their support for the ruling party as confirmation of their allegiance to the Georgian state.

According to one (ethnic Azeri) local government official, the inability to speak Georgian leads to the estrangement from the country's political, cultural and social life. In the words of another respondent (a focus-group member from Marneuli), *"poor knowledge of the language greatly impedes communication with other people. They talk to each other, but I cannot join their conversation. I feel like an outsider."*

Estrangement and mutual mistrust among ethnic groups

According to the respondents, the Azeri and Georgian communities of the region seem to be growing more and more estranged from one another. The language problem is an important, albeit not the only, reason for such a negative dynamic.

In Soviet times Azeri and Georgian residents used to communicate with each other basically in Russian. Although the Russian language remains a major communication tool for the two communities, it is gradually losing this function, as both the Azeri and Georgian youth speak Russian worse than older people, or do not speak it at all. However, while the Russian language is gradually becoming obsolete, fluency in Georgian has yet to become more widespread. As a result, it is increasingly difficult for the Azeri and Georgian communities, especially for young people, to find a "common language" in the literal sense.

Apart from creating objective obstacles to inter-communal communication, the language problem also fuels mutual mistrust between the two communities, though it does not lead to open confrontation. Ethnic Azeri and ethnic Georgian citizens have different attitudes about the fact that ethnic Azeris usually do not speak Georgian. Namely, 89.3 per cent of the Georgian respondents said that all citizens of the country must speak the official language. In contrast, only 58.6 per cent of the Azeri respondents thought so. Moreover, many Georgians believe that as long as they live in their home country they should not have to speak Russian or any other language apart from Georgian. According to one respondent (an ethnic Azeri from Gardabani), Georgians often refuse to speak to Azeri residents in Russian. They may either not know the language or refuse to speak it on principle, sending a message to the Azeri community: “If you think that you do not have to speak Georgian, why should we know Russian?” or “If we keep on speaking Russian to you, you will never bother to learn Georgian.” The language problem was a major stumbling-block for mixed focus-groups of young people in Marneuli District: Georgian respondents refused to speak Russian, while the other participants did not understand Georgian.

Many Georgians believe that Azeri citizens do not make enough effort to learn the country’s official language because they do not have due respect for the country they live in. Georgians often say: in the decade and a half since regaining independence there has still been no progress in learning the language - how long should we wait? In the words of a young Georgian woman (a Marneuli focus group member), *“the unwillingness to learn the language is a personal rather than an ethnic problem. If someone does not want to learn, no state programme or professional teacher will be able to help.”* In the opinion of many Georgian respondents, the government should have a more clear stance on the language problem – *“If the government takes stringent measures, the Azeri residents will have to learn the language.”* (Gardabani focus group member)

Azeri citizens consider such accusations to be unjust. All ethnic Azeri respondents (including people known as “radicals”) admitted that ethnic Azeri citizens must speak Georgian. Many of them emphasised that they tried hard to learn the language and say that they should not be blamed for their poor knowledge of the language. In their words, *“It is our bad luck, not our fault, that we do not know Georgian.”* (Gardabani focus group member). Furthermore, Georgian is regarded as a very difficult language that requires a lot of time to attain fluency in. In addition, Azeri respondents say it is the government that must assume responsibility for solving the problem, i.e. it should create favourable conditions for learning the language. The respondents complained about the low quality of currently available

Georgian language courses, ineffective teaching methodology, and the lack of opportunity to practice speaking Georgian in the villages.

Many respondents accused the government of doing nothing to increase the motivation to learn Georgian. They say that ethnic Azeri citizens have little chance of getting a good job, even if they speak Georgian fluently. *“With bleak job prospects there is no incentive to learn the language. Many wonder: why should we learn the language? We will have to trade in the market anyway, so a couple of words will be quite enough to this end. If prospects were promising, one would not hesitate to spend money on private tuition,”* – a participant of a focus group in Marneuli pointed out. Respondents from a youth focus group in Gardabani (which seemed more open-minded than the other participants) said: *“frankly, only a few people (only about 50 per cent) are willing to learn Georgian”*. Many prefer to speak Russian, since they see better employment opportunities in Russia and not many chances of getting a job in Georgia, even if they are fluent in Georgian.

In the words of some respondents, being frequently reproached by Georgian residents for not speaking Georgian by no means increases their motivation to learn the language. In fact, it has quite the opposite effect. Ethnic Azeris are made to feel like guests in Georgia, though they want to be full-fledged citizens of the country.

At the same time, quite a few respondents claimed that the Azeri community has a growing interest in learning the official language. Indeed, there are differing attitudes within the Azeri community towards studying the Georgian language. These attitudes are affected by a difference in survival strategies. Part of the Azeri population tends to lead a secluded life or migrate to Azerbaijan or Russia, while others are willing to integrate into Georgian society. A good number of Azeri citizens have not yet made up their mind as to which strategy is better for them. The research showed that younger Azeri citizens know Georgian much better than the older generation. Participants in a focus-group in Marneuli said:

“A majority of the youth, with their active lifestyle, have already began learning the [Georgian] language”.

“It is noteworthy that the situation has changed somewhat in recent times. Half the pupils in Georgian secondary schools are ethnic Azeri, maybe because they are well aware that they will be never promoted to high positions without speaking the language fluently”.

“Don’t think that people do not recognize the importance of the Georgian language. I have five grandchildren, one of whom attends a Georgian secondary school, while the other four go to Georgian kindergarten” (ethnic Azeri villager).

According to official data of the Marneuli District administration broadcast by the Marneuli-based TV company “Algeti” on 24 April 2003, seven hundred ethnic Azeri children were attending Georgian secondary schools of the district at that time.

These data demonstrate that part of the Azeri community has realised that fluency in Georgian is one of the main preconditions for success in Georgia. These Azeri citizens obviously believe that the quality of Georgian language study in Azeri and Russian secondary schools is very poor and, therefore, the only way for their children to learn the language efficiently is to enrol them in a Georgian school. As pupils at Georgian schools, Azeri children will naturally have better opportunities for integration into Georgian society not only in terms of language fluency, but also because they will be able to make friends with their Georgian coevals.

Still, many ethnic Azeri citizens remain sceptical about this strategy. Some of them do not believe in the positive effects of integration – “ *we will still never be able to scrape out a living,*” “*we will be always treated as second-class citizens,*” respondents said. Others fear that if their children go to Georgian schools, the cultural and ethnic identity of the Azeri community will be endangered. Moreover, some respondents were afraid that ethnic Azeri pupils of Georgian schools might be converted to Christianity. The Georgian school curriculum includes religious studies, which in practice may mean that of Christian theology. Azeri residents usually point to this fact to explain why they are reluctant to send their kids to Georgian schools, despite assurances from authorities that such lessons are not mandatory for Muslim pupils. It seems that many Azeri parents are worried that even if exempt from attending these lessons, their children may be targeted by proselytising activities in Georgian schools.

Problems of the education system

The education system should play the leading role in addressing the language problem. Since the overwhelming majority of ethnic Azeri children go to non-Georgian-language secondary (Azeri- or Russian-language) schools, this section is focused on the problems concerning these schools. There is a broad consensus that the education system has hitherto provided few opportunities for ethnic minorities studying in non-Georgian-language schools to learn the official language sufficiently to achieve integration. After independence, especially following the Rose Revolution, the Georgian government has made great efforts to improve the

situation, yet most of the respondents assessed the government's policy as ineffective. Some of them were negatively disposed towards the measures the authorities have taken.

The general situation in the language education system

In Soviet times little attention was given to Georgian language studies in non-Georgian secondary schools and the Azeri community's poor knowledge of Georgian was not perceived as a problem. After the country became independent, all of its citizens came to realise that fluency in Georgian was a must. In the early 1990s, however, when state institutions were in deep crisis, no attempts were made to change the situation.

In 1997 the government drew up a state programme to teach Georgian in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, i.e. regions where ethnic non-Georgians predominate. The authors of the programme assumed that the lack of professional teachers of Georgian in these regions was a major impediment to improving the quality of Georgian language teaching there. Teachers of the Georgian language, history and geography underwent special training in the framework of the programme. To increase their motivation, Georgian language teachers in non-Georgian secondary schools were paid bonuses. In the framework of the programme, teachers from other regions of Georgia, mainly from Rustavi and Tbilisi, were assigned to ethnic enclaves.

After the Rose Revolution, in 2004, in addition to this programme, the government announced a contest for teachers of the Georgian language, history and geography. Winners of the contest were promised bigger grants. This initiative had the same objective – to create financial incentive for professional teachers from other regions of Georgia to move to ethnic enclaves. At present a number of such teachers are teaching Georgian language, literature, history and geography in non-Georgian secondary schools. They are informally dubbed “missionaries”.

The Ministry of Science and Education is also implementing several other measures to improve the quality of the Georgian language teaching. Namely, it organized a contest to provide non-Georgian-language schools with necessary textbooks. The winner of the contest – the Tbilisi-based Intellect publishing house – was given a grant to edit and print textbooks on Georgian grammar, literature, history and geography for non-Georgian-language secondary schools. In the first year of the implementation of this programme the textbooks were distributed among non-Georgian-language schools for free. The programme also

provides funding for the so-called strategically important schools, including those in Azeri-populated villages, such as Vakhtangisi and Tsalka.

Local people's attitudes towards the education system

There are differing opinions on the effectiveness of the government's language education programmes. Many respondents, including those involved in their implementation, argued that the programmes were ineffective. They put forward the following arguments:

- *Adequate methodology is lacking.* Although many teachers were given special training, quite a few respondents complained that there was no effective methodology for teaching Georgian as a second language. Textbooks of Georgian grammar, literature, history and geography are complicated and hard to understand. Besides, teachers of Georgian, especially the "missionaries", usually do not speak Azeri, while the number of pupils who understand Russian has been falling in recent times (partly because the amount of class time devoted to Russian language lessons has been cut). Thus the teachers and their pupils do not have a common language to communicate with each other. In such cases the teachers must use a special methodology to teach a second language without knowing the language of the pupils. But the "missionaries" do not have such skills. The teachers give priority to the daily grind of learning words or poems. The children, meanwhile, have difficulty putting together sentences through a grammatically and logically correct combination of words. They do not develop practical skills, which can help them, for instance, to write a letter or compile a report.

- *There are few professional teachers.* Despite the ministry's efforts to recruit more "missionaries", in some remote villages Georgian is still taught by non-professional teachers with no academic education or appropriate skills.

- *The number of the Georgian language lessons is inadequate.* The amount of class time devoted to Georgian language lessons is obviously not enough for the pupils to be able to master the language.

- *"Missionaries" enjoy unfair privileges.* School teachers in Kvemo Kartli with years of teaching experience are frustrated and upset because the "missionaries" are paid higher salaries and receive more government benefits. In his state of the nation address to the parliament in spring 2005 president Saakashvili called the missionaries "heroes". Local teachers do not hide their displeasure with his words. Why are the people who do not live in the region and work there only in order to receive a high salary considered heroes, while the

teachers who worked hard for years here for much smaller wages are forgotten? – they wonder. The privileged “missionaries” look down on local teachers, which often leads to tensions between them. Furthermore, according to some respondents, skilled ethnic Azeri teachers who speak both Azeri and Georgian are often overlooked, even though they are best suited for teaching Georgian in Azeri secondary schools.

- *The local branch of Tbilisi State University does not educate teachers of the Georgian language well enough.* Many of the above-described problems could be solved if the local branch of Tbilisi State University had a programme to educate teachers of the Georgian language. Local students are more “embedded” in the region and better know local problems. Nonetheless, the quality of Georgian language study there remains rather low. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the university will be able to turn out highly qualified teachers in the near future.

- *The textbooks are poorly designed.* Textbooks of other subjects, which are often supplied to non-Georgian schools from other countries, are well designed and have nice colours. This provides a stark contrast to the dull and colourless Georgian language textbooks printed in Georgia.

As a result, Georgian language teaching in these schools is rather ineffective. Some residents prefer to hire tutors for their children, though not all local families can afford private tuition.

One of the elements of the planned education reform, namely a project to teach history and geography in non-Georgian secondary schools only in Georgian, has also drawn criticism from the Azeri community. Small wonder that teachers of these schools are especially angry - they are afraid of losing their jobs. As they do not speak Georgian well enough to teach these subjects in Georgian, the schools will have to employ ethnic Georgian teachers. If so, however, the children who do not understand Georgian will certainly have problems, the teachers claim. Teachers must speak both languages in order to be able to teach these subjects in Georgian. But there are few bilingual teachers. A teacher at a Russian secondary school wondered why geography and history should be taught in Georgian in Azeri and Russian secondary schools. She questioned the assertion that this measure could help children learn Georgian better. To speak Georgian well, she said, pupils must study the language. In her opinion, the proposal will lead to nothing, as children’s knowledge of the Georgian language, history and geography will be equally poor.

The respondents came up with several ideas to improve the situation. They suggested, for instance, that TV programmes (both local and Tbilisi-based) might be instrumental in the

debate on the language problem and the popularization of the Georgian language. It would also be useful, the respondents said, to broadcast Georgian language courses on TV. In addition, with the lack of contact with Georgian speakers being one of the major obstacles to language learning, local residents proposed that mixed summer camps (30 or 45 days) be set up to bring together young people from different regions of Georgia.

The respondents also argued that when developing efficient textbooks and teaching methodology, researchers should examine and apply the experience of Azeri youths and children who have successfully learnt Georgian, as they may provide “clues” to more appropriate methods.

Local people’s attitudes towards post-revolution education reforms

Radical education reform is one of the most significant initiatives of the new Georgian government. That is why it is also important to assess the attitudes of the residents of Kvemo Kartli towards these initiatives, which do not directly address the language problem, but do affect the interests of ethnic minorities.

On the whole, most respondents were wary of the education reforms, especially the new regulations on enrolment in Georgian universities enacted in 2005. Under the new regulations, only those who successfully pass national matriculation exams carried out under the aegis of the Ministry of Science and Education can be admitted to Georgian institutes of higher education. On the whole, this reform is viewed as one of the most important achievements of the new Georgian government, since it led to fair practices and eliminated corruption in the enrolment process. At the same time, however, it created new problems for ethnic minorities. A Georgian language exam is mandatory for all applicants. In 2005 the Georgian language exam was less strict for graduates of non-Georgian-language schools, as it took into account the level of Georgian language teaching in non-Georgian schools. However, as the real quality of Georgian language study in these schools fell far short of the level required by the program, even such simplified exams proved hard to pass for graduates of non-Georgian schools. In 2006 there was a single Georgian language exam for all applicants, both Georgians and non-Georgians. On the other hand, graduates from non-Georgian schools were allowed to take the exam of Russian as a foreign language. In the education ministry’s opinion, this measure should somehow offset the Georgian language problem.

In fact, under the new regulations, graduates of non-Georgian schools have only a slim chance of entering Georgian higher education institutions. This is borne out by the

results of the 2005 national matriculation exams: only a few non-Georgian applicants managed to pass the exams that year.

In addition, ethnic minorities had earlier enjoyed privileged admission to Sulkhani Saba Pedagogical University, as they were supposed to pursue a teaching career in non-Georgian schools after graduation. After the revolution, however, the government abolished these (and all other) privileges.

Some representatives of ethnic minority communities view the government's education policy as discriminatory. In their opinion, the government wants to segregate ethnic minorities from the intellectual and educated segment of the society. Such a policy encourages youth migration in the country, as young citizens have to seek higher education abroad. Those of them who return to Georgia will be unable to get jobs anyway, since they do not speak Georgian.

New adult education initiatives

Special adult courses in the Georgian language have begun recently in Gardabani and Marneuli Districts. The courses are funded by the district's administration (*gamgeoba*) and available free of charge to all interested individuals. If this adult education programme is successful, similar courses will be set up in rural village councils (*sakrebulo*s) in future.

The Azeri community's attitude towards these initiatives is not uniform. As a rule, ethnic Azeris generally tend to approve of any Georgian language program. At the same time, however, they are often sceptical. The respondents complained about inefficient methodology and the lack of professional teachers, just as they did when speaking about secondary education. They also reiterated their argument that their motivation to learn the language was rather weak.

Conclusions and recommendations

The language problem remains one of the most significant obstacles to the social and political integration of the Azeri community. Most significantly, the problem does not show any signs of abating. A considerable number of ethnic Azeri residents are obviously willing to learn Georgian. The growing number of ethnic Azeri children in Georgian-language schools is indicative of the Azeri community's interest in learning the language. However, many ethnic Azeris (including young people) do not have strong motivation to master the official language, since they do not believe that fluency in Georgian can give them a better chance of

success in Georgia. On the other hand, given the gradual decline in the knowledge of Russian and the role of that language in the country's social life, the Azeri and Georgian communities are becoming increasingly estranged from each other. These processes can facilitate the marginalization of a part of the country's population and lead to inter-ethnic tensions and distrust.

It is the government that can solve the problem most effectively by implementing a well thought-out education policy. And it is important to understand that motivating citizens is a crucial factor: people must have a serious interest and aspiration to learn the language. The Azeri community's motivation has been weak thus far. Prospects for increasing this motivation depend on a number of factors, but they are beyond the scope of this report. To achieve this it is necessary to improve the effectiveness of the Georgian government and its credibility in the eyes of ethnic minorities, strengthen ethnic minorities' confidence in state agencies, make Georgian society more open to ethnic minorities, create precedents of successful careers for ethnic Azeri citizens of Georgia, etc. It must be kept in mind, however, that education policy and education projects alone can have a very positive impact on the situation. The research helped identify the following most important priorities:

- Georgian schools must become more attractive for non-Georgian children. This means, among other things, that school staff should be more attentive to the needs and concerns of minority children and their parents regarding, for instance, religious issues.
- Methods of bilingual education should be applied on a wider scale in non-Georgian schools. At the same time, ethnic minorities should be explained that bilingual education by no means restricts their right to get full-fledged education in their native language.
- The development of modern methodology to teach Georgian to students of different ages and levels should be given priority.